

INTRODUCTION



Towards the Vale do Amanhecer

Rome, Italy, August 2003

The crowd was gathering on the shore of the lake to wait for the fireworks. But something else was going on; along a small area of beach, a group of people were staring in another direction. Across the lake, there was a majestic pyramid-like mountain overseeing the waters, whilst a medieval castle reflected its lights on the surface. The growing moon above us was shedding a silver light on the dark sand. Ana Paula's white dress was leading the scene, floating as she entered the water, her eyes facing the horizon but her gaze somewhere else. What caught my attention was the silence of the people around her; the enchanted children seemed to perceive that something magic was going on, and an atmosphere of sacred expectation mixed with curiosity pervaded the scene. '*Salve Yemanjá!*', she exclaimed, greeting the Afro-Brazilian *orixá*¹ of the waters, this on the night of the celebrations for the Virgin Mary's Assumption on the Italian bank holiday of August 15th.

Ana Paula, a Brazilian woman, was someone I thought could provide me with some contacts while doing research on Brazilian religions. The first time I met her at that lake in Italy, she walked towards me squinting her eyes to focus me. She was in her mid forties and had golden skin. Her smooth facial features were surrounded by dark curly hair. 'Is it Candomblé that you are interested in?' she asked me, after introducing herself, 'I can probably help you, but we are not going to talk about Candomblé today, I am going to tell you about a different kind of Brazilian religion: it's called "Vale do Amanhecer" and I have the feeling that you are going to go there'.

She told me that seldom would she tell people about the religious aspects of her past in Brazil, particularly in a country like Italy, where people were not used to talking about, nor with, spirits. She was a medium of the Vale do Amanhecer (Valley of the Dawn) and during the 1980s had lived in the main temple near Brasília, while the founder was still alive. She helped with the opening of some of the first external temples in Bahia, São Paulo and Porto Alegre. It was sufficient enough to look at the images of the Vale that she showed me – with the impressive visual impact of the colourful ritual vestments and sacred spaces, which included a pyramid – to decide that Ana Paula's feeling would turn out to be correct.

I frequently visited Ana Paula for almost a year before leaving for Brazil. During our meetings, she patiently introduced me to the Ordem Espiritualista Cristã Vale do Amanhecer (Spiritualist Christian Order Valley of the Dawn), founded by the clairvoyant Neiva Chaves Zelaya (1925–1985). Towards the end of the 1950s, in the desert plateau of central Brazil, the new capital was built from scratch in only four years through a visionary project of President Juscelino Kubitschek. He envisioned it not only as the country's political centre but as a modernist city that would bring together Brazilian society in a sort of all-inclusive plan, which was then fed by millenarian narratives and prophecies that depicted Brasília as the capital of the third millennium. Thus, the new capital began to attract a variety of spiritual groups and host the centres of several religions, and it became known as the 'Capital of Esotericism and Mysticism' (Siqueira 2002), or 'Mystic Brasília' (Reis 2008). Among the workers in search of new opportunities, coming from all across Brazil to build this massive enterprise, there was a truck driver, Neiva, a woman in her thirties, widow and mother of four, who all of a sudden began to experience mediumistic phenomena that led her in 1959 to plant the seeds for what would later become a spiritual town of mediums on the outskirts of Brasília, the Vale do Amanhecer, which would flourish along with the capital and rapidly spread with temples throughout Brazil and worldwide. She held that her phenomena included astral travels through the spirit worlds and several historical times, as well as visions and instructions from spirit guides, which led her to the transposition on earth of the ritual vestments, spaces, symbols, words and movements that define the Vale do Amanhecer for the spiritual healing of patients and to assist humanity in the troubled transition towards a new era (N.C. Zelaya 1985). Among her main spirit guides were the Amerindian spirit called Pai Seta Branca (Father White Arrow), who presented himself as the same spirit who had an incarnation as Saint Francis of Assisi, and Mãe Yara (Mother Yara), who had incarnated as Saint Clare, both working with different groups of spirits of light such as the *pretos velhos* (African slaves), *caboclos* (Amerindians), German and Brazilian doctors, princesses, gypsies, knights and spiritual ministries among others,

working under the aegis of Jesus Christ. She soon became widely known in Brazil as the clairvoyant Tia Neiva (Aunt Neiva), who, while channelling a Spiritualist doctrine and developing new, highly ritualistic forms of mediumship, was also grounding her spiritual work in charitable social assistance. The Temple of the Amanhecer is, indeed, understood as a *pronto socorro espiritual* (spiritual first aid), where people find spiritual assistance free of charge for spiritual, emotional, material and health issues. In sixty years, the first community of Vale do Amanhecer grew into a town of 10,000 inhabitants, mostly mediums of the Vale. And around 700 external temples were opened in Brazil and abroad, spreading across North and South America and Europe.

Mediums, who call themselves ‘Jaguars’, understand their practice as charitable work for which they do not accept payment or offerings. Their voluntary work as mediums is also considered to be a way to redeem their karma from their joint past lives as a spirit group in specific historical times, such as in Ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome, as Mayans and Incas, and during the French Revolution and in Colonial Brazil. In rituals, mediums in a semi-conscious mediumistic trance incorporate spirit guides to assist patients with messages of hope and a spiritual cleansing called ‘disobsessive healing’ (*cura desobsessiva*). This involves the release of disincarnate spirits understood as affecting (obsessing) the patient. Differently from the spirit guides, these obsessing spirits are considered to be spirits of the deceased who remained trapped between the planes after death, and mediums regard as part of their spiritual work that of helping also those ‘disincarnate patients’ to be released into higher spirit worlds. Unlike some Spiritist groups, however, rituals in Vale do Amanhecer do not offer direct communication with departed relatives or friends, but only with spirit guides deemed to belong to high hierarchies, namely the ‘spirits of light’.

One day Ana Paula opened a box and showed me some old photos of Tia Neiva, her original letters and the images of her spirit guides. She then showed me an essential part of her ritual uniform, the *colete*, the white waistcoat of the initiate, which in her case was turning yellow after years of mediumistic practice. The *colete*, she explained, was also used to indicate through its symbols the type of mediumship of the initiate. In a quite straightforward way, she said:

We are all mediums. All human beings. It is not the belief in spirits that makes you a medium. It is within our body; we have different ways of perceiving other planes. In the Vale, we develop two kinds of mediumship: the *aparã*, such as in my case, is the medium who incorporates spirits, and the *doutrinador*, is the medium who does not incorporate spirits but uses intuition and is able to elevate them to the spirit world.

Wearing ritual vestments and incorporating spirits, however, is not something that happens so straightforwardly in some people's lives, and the notions that people have about being a medium are also quite vague. And this is true both for those who arrive in the Vale without any belief and those who arrive already manifesting spontaneous mediumistic phenomena. So how do they establish a relationship with spiritual beings? How do spirits become so relevant in people's lives? And how do these embodied encounters with spirits influence people's notions of body and self?

Once one looks beyond the first impressions of the colourful ritual uniforms and the kaleidoscopic geometries of the sacred spaces, one may realize that behind this there are lawyers, doctors, scholars, artisans, traders, farmers and students, as well as retired and unemployed people, who do voluntary work as mediums in the temple during their spare time. Why would a professional after work in the city rush home to wear those uniforms and go to work spiritually in the temple? Why would they spend the weekend or their holidays working with patients and spirits? How is mediumistic practice meaningful for these people? Answering these questions will give us insight into a particular kind of religiosity, an extended notion of the self, an understanding of illness and healing, of life and death. The religious biographies of the mediums I met in my research recounted past routes across different religions in search of an active, participative, immediate and embodied relationship with the divine, which they describe as being fulfilled by their mediumistic practice. Others also revealed their therapeutic trajectories unfolding between spirituality and biomedicine in the search for healing. Every scholar, and indeed anyone else visiting Brazil, cannot fail to note the incredible religious diversity and the fluidity of different religious trajectories and forms of religiosity that define the accents and rhythms of daily life. If Brazil offers a unique setting for researching mediumistic religions, the Vale do Amanhecer, one of the most visually spectacular among Brazilian religious forms, offers a remarkable opportunity for the study of a particular view of the wider processes of Brazilian religiosity, and especially of mediumistic phenomena that embrace core aspects of human experience.

Approaching Spirit Mediumship

Vale do Amanhecer, Brasília, October 2004

On a full moon night, I stood by the pyramid photographing a ritual taking place in the open-air sacred space around the Lake of Yemanjá in the Templo Mãe (Mother Temple), the main temple of the Amanhecer near Brasília. I was with a medium receptionist, who was in charge of accompanying

visitors, reporters and researchers. He suddenly pointed out his view on ethnography, explaining that as a receptionist he was used to people coming there for short visits and leaving with basic information about rituals, in many cases publishing articles in which they attributed to them labels and ideas that did not belong to the Vale. He lamented the fact that by being caught by the visual impact of rituals and mediums' uniforms seldom would they ask for their meanings. He had a different expectation regarding my ethnographic work: 'everyone here has a story to tell ... you are putting together this puzzle that composes the Vale do Amanhecer'. A similar concern that many researchers face during fieldwork and in ethnographic writing, especially when writing about mediumistic phenomena, is with how we should deal with local categories when they clash against our own ones.

The earlier studies on spirit mediumship and possession were largely characterized by explanatory paradigms, which often led to pathologizing reductions, since they were informed by Western notions of a bounded self and driven by the mind/body dichotomy. Several anthropologists have repeatedly warned that the direct translation of a set of categories from one culture into another is often misleading (Evans-Pritchard 1976 [1937]; Lienhardt 1961; Goldman 2006; Holbraad 2008, 2009). The expression 'cognitive empathetic engagement' was coined by Fiona Bowie to describe an approach in which the ethnographer, rather than dismissing native categories, learns to think through these local concepts as they are lived through, although maintaining a situated and critical empathy (Bowie 2013). Phenomenological approaches to religious experience seek non-reductive ways to address religious phenomena that do not always fit into Western secular explanatory paradigms, with peculiar attention to how people come to experience them as real, particularly through the approach of embodiment – that is, conceiving the body not as an object but as a living entity through which we perceive and experience the world (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Csordas 1990; Desjarlais 1992; Stoller 1997; Desjarlais and Throop 2011; Knibbe and Van Houtert 2018). The phenomenological approach that I adopt in this work is interested in exploring the relations between the phenomenal and discursive (Ingold 2000; Throop 2003). I especially refer to Ingold's understanding of 'narratives' as being the ways in which lived, bodily and perceptual experiences are creatively interwoven and 'the ways in which the resulting discursive constructions in turn affect people's perceptions of the world around them' (2000: 285).

Talking about mediumistic practices often raises in the listener a mixture of fascination and scepticism, curiosity and fear, covering the phenomena with an aura of mystery. However, for many people in a great variety of societies around the world, including Western ones, these phenomena are part of an everyday life in which the boundaries between the world of the living

and of the dead, spirits or deities are conceived as permeable. In different cultures, spiritual beings are variably considered enunciators of knowledge about the afterlife; or guides that bring healing and assist the living with their lives on earth or accompany the specialists of the sacred through the spirit worlds. Some spirits are otherwise understood as opposing forces or pathogenic agents that need to be exorcized or removed from a particular person or place. Whether welcome or not, these spiritual agents are understood as being able to communicate through, be embodied by or influence to different extents human beings. I refer to 'mediumistic practices', addressing the many ways and techniques through which this type of communication, embodiment or influence may happen in different cultures, in more or less controlled ways, assuming local features and conceptualizations. Being a spirit medium is understood as mediating the knowledge from the spirit world, and the body is the primary site of this mediation and process of learning spirit mediumship. While mediumistic experience is not exclusively a bodily experience, in the Vale do Amanhecer, the mediums' narratives of their mediumistic experiences prioritize the bodily dimension over belief – that is, their sense of transformation and belief passes through emotions and bodily feeling. But to be more precise, seldom would they refer to 'belief'; they would rather prefer to use the term *conhecimento* (knowledge), a kind of knowledge that is not only propositional but is 'felt'. What my interlocutors intended to stress was indeed that notions of mediumship should not be addressed independently from experiences, bodies, emotions, feelings and stories, which ultimately ground these ideas.

This book seeks to explore how conceptual categories intertwine with lived, bodily and affective experiences, especially in the process of learning spirit mediumship. In my approach, I draw upon two main scholarly threads: on the one hand on studies that approach the bodily dimension of spirit mediumship and possession (Stoller 1989, 1994; Desjarlais 1992; Strathern 1996; Halloy 2015); and on the other hand, on those that approach the process of learning religion, seeking to restore the prominence of the body (Goldman 2007; Berliner and Sarró 2009; Halloy and Naumescu 2012). The question of how notions of possession and the self are produced and transmitted is increasingly intriguing anthropologist working in the field of spirit mediumship and possession. Cognitive anthropology has extensively addressed religious transmission (Whitehouse 2000, 2004; Boyer 2001; Whitehouse and Laidlaw 2004), and as far as it concerns studies on possession, it has been mainly interested in the exploration of the underlying cognitive structures that may account for the cross-cultural recurrence of concepts of possession from a mind-centred perspective (Cohen 2007, 2008). As Andrew Strathern notes, the focus on 'embodiment represents a return to the sensuous quality of lived experience' (1996: 198). He considers

‘the reentry of the body into the scene of social theorising’ precisely ‘as a result of a reaction against the mentalistic patterns of enquiry and explanation that have previously dominated’ (ibid.). In this work, I understand ‘learning’ in Ingold’s terms as a process of ‘enskillment’, as learning to sense the environment in culturally specific ways (2000). Halloy and Naumescu particularly suggested that when considering religious transmission, along with the cognitive architecture one should also take into account ‘patterns of feeling and perceiving’ and ‘recurrent sets of affects and percepts’ (2012: 168). They have identified a gap in the literature concerning a consideration of ‘the way contextual factors shape cognitive, perceptual and emotional processes leading to possession expertise’ (2012: 166).

The Vale do Amanhecer provides us with the opportunity to investigate ethnographically in depth these intertwinements given the conscious and semi-conscious modalities of mediumship developed in the temple, which allow mediums to describe different feelings and processes at work in their experiences of mediumistic trance. Provided that mediumistic development draws extensively upon bodily experience, throughout my discussion I look at embodied knowledge. More specifically, I am interested in how mediumistic development informs notions of the body and the self. Indeed, becoming a spirit medium in the Vale do Amanhecer involves the development of mediumistic skills through an education of perception, which draws upon discernment and may lead to the transformation of one’s sense of self. My main argument is that the primacy given to bodily experience in the first stages of learning to become a medium articulates notions of a permeable body and an extended and multidimensional self, which also informs conceptualizations of mediumistic trance. Then, I will explore how such embodied knowledge informs spiritual and therapeutic experiences in a broader perspective. Specifically, I will present some cases of people who arrived in the Vale for therapeutic purposes and chose to develop their mediumship. I will propose that the notions of the self and bodily skills informed by their mediumistic development triggered their process of healing. Understanding the self as extended towards other lives and in other dimensions and thus interacting also with non-human spirits requires one to develop the skill of discernment. ‘Developing a sense of self as separate from others is considered the cornerstone of human cognition and well-being. ... we define our selves through our past, present, future, and imagined involvement with people and things; our selves extend into these worlds, and they into us’ (Ochs and Capps 1996: 29–30).

Concepts of the self articulated by a specific society inform an individual’s self-image and the interpretation of their experiences, and the way the self emerges as a ‘perceptible object’ for an individual is all culturally oriented in a behavioural environment (Hallowell 1955: 75–76).

Moreover, according to Hallowell, the 'social' relations of the self may include more than its ordinary behavioural environment to encompass 'other selves', such as spiritual beings; thus, self-awareness emerges in relation to human and other-than-human beings (ibid.: 91). Scholars have assumed a direct correspondence between cultural models of the self and subjective experiences, as if cultural models were to encompass all aspects of the experiential self and be entirely integrated into everyday experience, and this discrepancy may be problematic (Hollan 1992: 285). For instance, Hollan shows how the cultural model of an impermeable bounded self in North American society was poorly accounting for the experiential self of his respondents, who in face of a loss of a relative experienced a 'death' of part of one's self: 'the self is at least partly constituted by the "others" with whom it interacts and ... the boundaries between self and other may remain somewhat fluid and indistinct' (ibid.: 289). Cultural representation alone may not account for the experiential self; both intersubjective experience and perceptual experience are indeed crucial factors involved in the way the self is constituted. The entanglement between these factors needs to be explored ethnographically. One remarkable exploration of the relation between the production of the self, cosmogony and mediumship was conducted by Diana Espírito Santo in her study on Cuban Spiritism. Spiritism is addressed as a 'technology of self-making', whereby the self is presented as discursively emergent and relational to the point that spirits of '*muertos* materialize their mediums as much as the other way around' (Espírito Santo 2015: 289).

The centrality given to the self in this book concerns the ongoing articulation of the self through the process of learning and practising mediumship and the encounter with spirit guides. One should note that this process of transformation may not be the initial appeal of the Vale do Amanhecer to participants. What leads people to develop as a medium may not be an ideal notion that one has to embrace or aim for, rather it may involve a variety of circumstances, ranging from health issues to relational ones, and the trajectories that emerge from my interlocutors' narratives of these experiences. In this sense, narratives are key in mediating self-understanding, in mediating between discourse and practice (Ochs and Capps 1996). Notions of the self, however, become relevant during the mediumistic development, as this process engenders forms of selfhood through the embodied encounter with spirits. Rather than transmitting notions of the self, the development 'grounds' – as one participant pointed out – and develops the self in the body through experience. Self is hereby understood as developed from the interaction between discursive and bodily dimensions. Moreover, since the self is also temporally oriented (Hallowell 1955), I will also consider the extended self in transhistorical terms through the narratives of mediums'

past lives, often co-existing with the spirits with whom they work in rituals to bring along the forces left in the past for spiritual healing.

Embodied Knowledge in the Field

Vale do Amanhecer, Brasília, November 2009

When I discussed my ideas about researching mediumship with Mestre Itamir, a medium who had followed my research since my first fieldwork in the Vale, he expressed his concern

about the scholarly ways of approaching mediumship. His concern was specifically about the predominance of ‘listening, seeing and writing’ over ‘sensing and feeling’ in the research practice. ‘This is what makes the difference – he said – listening and seeing are different from feeling. So be careful in paying attention to your own bodily feelings and sensations, as this is the only way to get in touch with this phenomenon and to understand its meaning for us, even if you don’t incorporate spirits’.

In another case, my friend Pedro led me to observe the sense of impatience and frustration I was having when in the middle of a conversation he would often shut down in communication or drastically change topic. According to him, the problem was due to the fact that I did not understand how to use intuition. Although I always perceived myself as being open-minded, he defined me interchangeably as pragmatic, rational and ‘with an apparent sensibility but not fully applied in life’. For him as a medium, these kinds of conversations on spiritual issues, rather than being based on question-answer strategies, implied other processes that regulated what could be said and what could not: these processes involved intuition and somatosensory perception, such as gut feelings. It was only with time that I came to understand the idea that energy was always in movement in each conversation; how a topic could change energy as much as energy could change a topic; and how an interruption in conversation may be interpreted as energetically influenced because the topic should not be discussed or because the interlocutor is not ready to understand it. Hence, Pedro pointed out that I had to question my own ways of knowing in order to enter into a process of communication and be able to conduct a conversation on spiritual matters. The ethnographic encounter implies far more than learning the local language to communicate; we should also become skilled in local ways of knowing and communicating, which may imply considering the embodied dimension of the encounter.

In subsequent fieldworks along the years, I shifted my focus from discourses to experiences once body and emotions emerged as relevant to

understanding my interlocutors' narratives. I became interested in understanding how this transformation of perception occurred and how it was possible to learn this way of knowing. How do people learn mediumship? How do they learn to distinguish between different spirits? How does mediumistic experience inform notions of the body and the self? In the Vale do Amanhecer, these complex processes begin to occur in mediumistic development. Some patients are indeed invited by spirits to develop their mediumship for a variety of reasons, ranging from karma to health matters. Those who choose to do so in the Vale learn to become aware of their mediumship and control it through a practical and bodily training.

Whilst I began to pay attention to my own sensations in rituals, passing through as a patient, I realized that this position had little to tell me about mediumistic experience. Given the centrality of the body in mediumistic development, in an advanced stage of fieldwork and having extensively explored this possibility with the mediums' instructors and leaders of the Order, I began the mediumistic development and thus to re-educate my own perception and ways of knowing. I realized that by engaging my own body and discussing my experiences with mediums in a comparative way I could reach insights otherwise difficult to consider as outcomes of disembodied techniques of elicitation. The kind of participation I experienced in the field – fully involving my body in the process of learning mediumship – may not always be possible. Since the ethnographic practice requires the methodological choices to be drawn from both the research focus and the specific field circumstances, a method that may seem appropriate in a specific field may not be suitable in other fields. Therefore, I am not advocating that participation is the only means through which a researcher has access to the understanding of mediumship. It was in my case, at a certain stage of my research, the most indicated way to reach valuable insights into the somatic elements involved in the process of learning mediumship. It allowed me to discuss with mediums the relationship between somatic aspects of mediumistic practice and notions of the self. If embodiment was a way of knowing among mediums, the dimension of the ethnographer's bodiliness in the process of knowing the field had also to be tackled.

Scholars have noted how the questions of participant observation, bodily knowledge and reflexivity are hardly debated when researching on spiritual experiences; current debates seem to have rehabilitated such discussions by exploring the value of the researchers' awareness of their bodily, experiential and affective dimensions while participating in other ways of living (Goulet and Granville Miller 2007; Bowie 2013; Pierini and Groisman 2016).

Among the experiential turn in ethnography, Barbara Tedlock in her discussion of participatory approaches, which predominantly focuses on the aspect of ethnographic representation, critically notes that:

What seems to lie behind the belief that ‘going native’ poses a serious danger to the fieldworker is the logical construction of the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity, between scientist and native, between Self and Other, as an unbridgeable opposition. The implication is that a subject’s way of knowing is incompatible with the scientist’s way of knowing and that the domain of objectivity is the sole property of the outsider. (Tedlock 1991: 71)

I propose that we need to question the assumption of ‘going native’ and understand participation as learning ways of knowing so as to ground intersubjectivity. In fact, bodily participation does not entail ‘going native’. Firstly, the category of ‘native’ is neither bounded nor homogeneous, especially as participants in this spiritual practice have different sociocultural backgrounds and personal trajectories, thus not only my experience was informed by my background but all mediums’ experiences are. Hence, if I am not assuming that the researcher’s experience is identical to that of others, it is also the case that the instructors of the mediumistic development constantly alert newcomers that ‘each medium is a different case’. Even when bodily experience in trance is similar, the anthropological insight emerges from the tension between world views, as Desjarlais (1992) maintains from his own apprenticeship with Nepali healers.

Secondly, participation can never be complete, as observation does not cease. Okely points out that ‘The fear of total participation is the fear that observation will cease. Yet there is always the need to take notes ... If note taking and the relevant anthropological analysis cease, then so does the research’ (2012: 78).² Equally, participation does not automatically entail the researcher closing the ‘ethnographic eye’. Indeed, I found myself engaged in an ongoing process of observation and interpretation even if my eyes were closed in rituals, which led me to develop an enhanced awareness of other ways of knowing. Furthermore, I have proposed that

This kind of participation does not imply that the ethnographer accepts beliefs at face value, because not even mediums do so when they approach the practice. It rather implies reflecting critically upon one’s bodily experience and the insights gained from it and discussing them with research participants establishing a particular kind of rapport (Favret-Saada 1990; Goldman 2003, 2005), and thus using this reflexivity as a common ground of interaction with research participants. (Pierini 2016b)

This common ground of interaction moved us to a new level of reflection in which both my questions and mediums’ narratives gained in depth and nuances. Certainly, what our interlocutors are willing to share is informed by what they perceive the ethnographer is prepared to understand. But primarily, in reflecting upon and comparing experiences, we were making the

effort to find ways to describe in words the felt immediacies of those experiences. Bodily knowledge allows moving beyond the limitations of verbal and visual modes of knowing, shifting from disembodied knowledge to the sensuous dimension of lived experience (Strathern 1996; Stoller 1997; Pink 2009; Okely 2007, 2012). Rather than reducing experience to a visual mode of understanding – particularly in cultural contexts where other senses may be more dominant than vision – ‘sensory ethnography’ affirms the multi-sensorial and emplaced character of learning in the field (Pink 2009: 64).

This level of ethnographic knowledge gained through participation and bodily involvement, rather than losing objectivity, may be valued for its reliability, as advocated by Goulet and Granville Miller: ‘In this experiential perspective, reliable ethnographic knowledge is generated through radical participation and vulnerability, not distance and detachment. How else are we to grasp a “people’s point of view”, *their* relation to life, to realize *their* vision of *their* world (Malinowski 1953, 25)’ (2007: 11). Detachment in search of objectivity during fieldwork ‘is *more* likely to transform the context’, as the ethnographer may be perceived as a threat or a critic; yet, involvement through participation may allow a greater ‘invisibility’ in terms of transforming contexts and, particularly, be understood as a sign of respect (Okely 2012: 77). The classic dichotomies of participation vs observation and subjective vs objective are indeed part of a false and misleading continuum, as one does not exclude the other (*ibid.*). Similarly, Csordas maintains that ‘the attempt to define a somatic mode of attention decentres analysis such that no category is privileged, and all categories are in flux between subjectivity and objectivity’ (1993: 146). Furthermore, I should point out that the kind of process of knowing in the field I am proposing should not reproduce dichotomies between intellectual and bodily ways of knowing, but eventually it should integrate the two.

‘Ethnographic objectivity’, as Fabian argues, should be pursued through knowing, where ‘knowing’ stands for ‘acting in company’ rather than contemplating, entailing an intersubjective and processual knowledge (2001: 29). Fabian understands the primacy of vision along with the displacement of ethnographic objectivity from the anthropological debate as a result of a shift of interest from knowledge production to representation: ‘It is no longer possible to limit oneself to the concepts and images derived from vision when discussing questions of objectivity’; the body should be rehabilitated as involved in knowledge production, in intersubjectivity, and thus in grounding ethnographic objectivity (*ibid.* 30). Furthermore, objectivity should not be intended as a product of emotional detachment and distance from actions and interlocutors during fieldwork, it is rather a matter of analytical rigor applied to field notes, including the ethnographer’s own experience as part of the data (Halloy 2016). Halloy, through an engaging

discussion of the epistemological aspects concerning his full participation and his experiences of being possessed and initiated in Afro-Brazilian Xangô, maintains that analytical ‘Rigor is not synonymous with cold indifference’ and that ‘emphatic resonance’ and ‘introspective expertise’ are skills that should be cultivated in the ethnographic practice, ensuring the validity of data (2016: 20).

A closer look at bodily experience may further illuminate how foreign categories may not fit local experience and understandings. This often results in reductionist or pathologizing approaches, especially when the level of discourse is approached separately from the perceptual level, remaining on the level of ‘belief’, which is a territory of contested categories. Namely, ‘concepts such as “knowledge” and “belief”, “body”, “self” and “personhood”, “health” and “illness” arise from the felt immediacy of the field’ (Pierini and Groisman 2016). I therefore propose to move from belief to experience, reframing cognition within the bodily dimension of spiritual practice. Through this shift, the researcher’s engagement with the field is cognitive and empathetic, and also bodily. Therefore, not only should we avoid bracketing out local experiences as not fitting into the Westerner framework, the researcher’s bodily experience should also be tackled in order to convey in writing at which levels the intersubjective and embodied nature of the ethnographic encounter and knowledge was constructed.

My methodological approach of engaging my body in learning mediumistic ways of knowing – which could be seen in line with phenomenological approaches in anthropology that fall under the umbrella of ‘apprenticeship’ – allowed me to unpack the multiple layers involved in the process of developing mediumship: embodied, intuitive, performative, conceptual and intersubjective learning. It provided valuable insights into how participants developing mediumship in the Vale do Amanhecer are not transmitted a belief but learn to cultivate a particular mode of knowing through their bodies: spirits become real for people as they learn to experience them through their bodies and in their everyday lives. Rather than being something transcendent, mediumship in the Vale do Amanhecer is understood as being grounded in the body, and thus one may develop ways of knowing through the body and cultivate a ‘mediumistic body’ intersubjectively. The process of transformation that the medium undergoes during the development is indeed deeply felt at the bodily level.

This research contributes to studies on spirit mediumship and possession in that it shows how a focus on the process of learning illuminates the articulation of bodies and serves as much as it informs therapeutic experiences. A multilayered process of learning mediumship also provides mediums with a multilayered articulation of the self: extended beyond the semi-permeable body, multidimensional and transhistorical. The study of the process of

learning mediumship contributes an in depth view on several aspects of human experience, and particularly on how notions can be articulated and even transformed through bodily experience, and this has its implications for therapeutic experiences, especially if we consider that illness, addictions and emotional suffering bring about a rupture in people's sense of body and self. The embodied knowledge articulated through mediumistic development, the cultivation of bodily control and of an extended sense of self in relation to spirits, as mediums' narratives will show, may be highly transformative in people's trajectories of therapy. These therapeutic narratives significantly unsettle the early approaches that reduced spirit mediumship and possession to pathologies. Therefore, this study calls for a reconsideration of spirit mediumship as a fertile ground for exploring the entanglements between experience and discourse that are not exclusive of mediumistic phenomena occurring in small-scale distant societies but rather extend into urban industrialized societies and particularly into different domains of human experience.

About the Book

This book is based upon extensive and intensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted at different stages since 2004 for an overall total of thirty-six months spent living in the temples of the Vale do Amanhecer. The longest period in the field involved living in the Templo Mãe in Brasília for fifteen months between 2009 and 2011, followed by shorter annual fieldworks in that community. Between 2011 and 2013, I spent seven months at different stages in several temples in Northeast and Southern Brazil. In Europe, I undertook short and long-term periods of ethnographic research in temples in England, Portugal and Italy between 2012 and 2018, which provided a significant view of consistencies and differences between experiences in different temples, enriching the ethnographic description. The relationships developed throughout those years with friends and research participants have constantly nourished my knowledge and insights on the lived dimension of the Vale do Amanhecer and contributed a valuable conversation about those research insights. Fieldwork in external temples of the Amanhecer allowed me to meet countless mediums, who spontaneously and informally shared with me their stories and experiences, and it gave me the opportunity to participate in a great variety of rituals and in unique processes such as: the transition of one temple from an initial stage to an advanced one, involving the physical construction of sacred spaces; the first initiations of European mediums in Portugal; and the opening of temples in Italy. Not all of these processes and experiences can be included

in detail in this book, but they certainly contributed in many ways to this ethnography. Besides participant observation, which has been my leading method, and the ongoing conversation with the founders and elders of the Order, I gathered formal interviews and biographical narratives, and I conducted extensive research through the mediums' private and public archives of Tia Neiva's letters and audio recordings and the bibliographic production of those who have closely collaborated with her and interpreted her revelations.

Whilst descriptions of the phenomena of incorporation of spirits by mediums in development are quite vivid and detailed, these are focused upon mediums' accounts of their experiences, thus the specific ritual sequences, scripts, verbal initiatic keys and techniques that instructors used to develop mediumship, as well as the ritual of initiation, have intentionally been left out from this book. In order to protect the identity of some mediums who shared their experiences for the purpose of this research I use pseudonyms and they will appear with first names only. For mediums who hold high hierarchical ranks or are elders or founders, or mediums who are somewhat known as a 'public figure' in the Order, I use their hierarchical titles in front of their real names (e.g. Trino, Adjunto, or Mestre).

In terms of the organization of the book, I opted to include some rich ethnographic descriptions of the ritualistic setting and cosmology, both considering the current lack of literature in English upon the Vale do Amanhecer and to provide context to understand the mediums' narratives of their experiences addressed more in depth in the second part of the book. Chapter One guides the reader through the variety of practices involving encounters with spirits through mediumship in contemporary Brazil. I illustrate the contemporary features of Brazilian religiosity – in which the worlds of humans and spirits merge through an embodied, emotional and direct relationship that is sought more as an experience than as a concept – and trace the historical background of these practices. Indeed, Brazilians experience different ways of encountering the divine, defining their complex trajectories across different religions through their relations with spirits. Human and spirit trajectories thus entwine to form what I address as the Brazilian religious meshwork. I then narrow down the focus to Brasília and the foundational, millenarian narratives that attracted many spiritual communities to settle around the new capital of Brazil in the 1960s. It was indeed while Tia Neiva was working on the construction of Brasília that she began experiencing the mediumistic phenomena that led to the foundation of the Vale do Amanhecer. Tia Neiva's biography will be introduced in Chapter Two, along with the social and spatial organization of the temples of the Amanhecer, which will be presented as a materialization of her spiritual experience through her peculiar way of knowing.

Chapter Three presents Tia Neiva's revelations on the different reincarnations of the mediums of the Vale do Amanhecer as a spirit group called the 'Jaguars'. The past incarnations of the Jaguars play a key role in the mediums' articulation of a transhistorical self through their mediumistic practice. Tia Neiva's narrative of the past lives of the Jaguars evokes cosmologies of ancient civilizations, Christianity, Eastern religions, Spiritism, Amerindian and Afro-Brazilian religions, Gypsy cultures, theosophy and millenarianism. These different lines are brought together into healing rituals in which mediums call upon the forces from their joint past lives; thus the principle of reincarnation determines the global character of the Vale do Amanhecer. Tackling the mediums' mission of helping humans and spirits in the transition towards a new era, I propose that the Vale's millenarian discourse does not derive from the New Age Movement but is rather deeply embedded in the millenarian discourses of Brazilian indigenous and popular cultures. Chapter Four illustrates the multidimensionality of the self extending through different lives and dimensions, the processes of incarnation and disincarnation of spirits and the mapping of the spirit worlds. The interactions and exchanges between these worlds, which I present as an ecology of fluids and substances, provide a context to understand how the self and the temple are forged through these fields of relations and to grasp how mediums understand the notion of 'spiritual knowledge'.

Chapter Five explains the spirit-related aetiology of illness and the spiritual treatment through the ritual itinerary that patients undertake in the temple to address the physical, emotional or material matters in their lives. It discusses how spiritual and biomedical epistemologies are conceived as complementary and how mediums understand 'disobsessive healing' as a 'mediumistic science'. Chapter Six addresses the notion of 'mediumship' in the Vale in comparison with categories used in other mediumistic religions or Spiritualist groups, showing how it is closely related to notions of the body: mediumship in the Vale is considered to be universally originating from the body and thus can potentially be developed by anyone through a specific training. Mediumship is also related to karma, and thus has implications for the transhistorical configuration of human-spirit relations. Chapter Seven focuses on the body in the first stages of mediumistic development, exploring the role of emotions, feelings and senses in cultivating the relationship with spirit guides. I argue that newcomers are not taught about the existence of spirits; they are not passed a belief. They rather come to learn how to feel the presence of spirits and how to discern which spirit is manifesting, which is a specific mode of knowing that urges us to shift our analytical stance from 'belief' to 'experience'. Learning mediumship is hereby approached as a process of 'enskillment' (Ingold 2000), which implies situating the practice through the ongoing education of perception.

It is a process that articulates a particular kind of embodied knowledge, reshaping notions of the body and the self.

Chapter Eight expands the perspective to tackle the place the Vale do Amanhecer's mediumistic practice occupies within contemporary religiosity in Brazil. By presenting the experiences that led people to practise mediumship in the Vale, this chapter argues that the development of an embodied relation with the sacred and of a specific conceptualization of the body in the Vale do Amanhecer re-establishes spiritual commitment to an initiatic Order within a context of intense religious mobility. Chapter Nine traces the therapeutic trajectories that led people to the Vale; they were seeking a spiritual approach to their illness, alcohol and drug addictions, or mental disorders. It particularly refers to those patients who chose to develop mediumship for therapeutic purposes, proposing that their healing process was triggered by the embodied knowledge and bodily skills engendered by the processes of learning mediumship and then accompanied by the shift of the initiates' role from that of patients to mediators of healing.

Phenomena of spirit mediumship and possession have often been reduced to symbols of social order, mentalistic patterns or even pathologized through Western psychiatric categories. Mediumship, however, is not understandable exclusively in psychological, sociological or biological terms. Drawing upon the current debate in psychiatry concerned with the need to discern between spiritual and pathological experiences, I propose that an ethnographic approach that takes into account lived experience and modes of knowing may assist in making this discernment possible, showing how in some cases therapeutic trajectories may rather inform an initiatic path. Mediumship is a multidimensional phenomenon, and this multidimensionality may be illuminated through an approach that considers the process of learning mediumship as learning a way of knowing.

Notes

1. A deity known all across Brazil in African-derived religions as the sea goddess.
2. According to Okely 'going native' is a cliché 'legacy of the colonial discourse ... passed on to anthropologists seemingly to avoid alignment with indigenous people' (2012: 78–79).